

“You can’t be up there” – youth cultural participation and appropriation of space

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Abstract

This article investigates the relationship between youth cultural practices and young people’s spatial appropriation. For this purpose, we analyse case studies into groups of young people involved in two forms of practices that are marked by particular perceptions of the (urban) space: two Parkour groups and a Scouts group. The questions we are dealing with concern the way to which young members of these groups are appropriating ‘free space’ through participating in activities like the Scouts or Parkour. Furthermore, this article also explores important questions concerning processes of how young people’s participation in urban areas should be understood and what consequences this understanding has for youth policy.

Keywords: participation, youth cultures, space, young people, youth work

„Ihr dürft da nicht hoch“ – Jugendkulturelle Partizipation und Aneignung von Raum

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel untersucht das Verhältnis zwischen jugendkulturellen Praktiken und Raumaneignung junger Menschen. Im Mittelpunkt stehen Fallstudien zu zwei unterschiedlichen Formen der Wahrnehmung (städtischen) Raums: zwei organisierte Parkour-Gruppen und eine Pfadfindergruppe. Die Autor*innen beschäftigen sich mit der Frage nach Formen der Aneignung von ‚freien Räumen‘ im Rahmen organisierter Aktivitäten wie den Pfadfindern und Parkour. Darüber hinaus untersucht dieser Artikel wichtige Fragen in Bezug auf das Verständnis von Prozessen der Beteiligung junger Menschen in urbanen Gebieten und welche Konsequenzen dieses Verständnis für die Jugendpolitik hat.

Schlagwörter: Partizipation, Jugendkulturen, Raum, Jugend, Jugendarbeit

1 Introduction

When experts from the youth field – for example, teachers, youth workers and policy-makers – are asked about today’s youth life worlds and young people’s chances to actively participate in them, they often underscore a discursive line that centres around the loss or the lack of ‘free spaces’ in modern European cities (*Batsleer et al. 2017*). Such free spaces may be public ones, which by definition should be accessible to everyone (*Lofland*

1998). However, they can also be more limited in scope since this "*concerns spaces that are free from external expectations and performance requirements, in which young people can simply be alone and in which they can contribute their own design ideas and become co-creators of the spaces*" (Batsleer et al. 2017, p. 39).

Behind this topos, we assume a certain interpretation of changes in the urban context after World War II that is shared widely among professionals from diverse youth political fields (Thomas et al. 2018). Baacke (1999, p. 165) interprets the urban space of action in its entirety as a highly differentiated mosaic of compartmentalised and functionalised islands that are only seldomly linked to each other (Zeihner 1990). In several youth research areas, negative consequences of this functionalisation process have been the central object of study: the development of segregated youth cultures and of youth violence (Beaud/Pialoux 2003) or the 'street' as a label for problem behaviour (van Gemert et al. 2008; critical: Zinnecker 1980) are closely linked to the problems arising from exclusionary spaces within cities. Often the negative consequences for individual and social processes are emphasised: the city is perceived as a force of structural violence particularly against children and young people where the limitations, the mono-functionality and overwhelming rules and regulations are seen as restricting spaces (critical: Reutlinger 2013). In this discourse, all these problems culminate in the city periphery where social housing blocks were erected to house the growing urban populations. To maintain a sense of self-identity within these alienating urban environments, children and youth often clash with the urban structures (Reutlinger 2013). Vandalism, graffiti, and the occupation of shopping malls and streets are seen as consequences of these tensions and are interpreted as an expression of young people's alienation with the social spaces around them. Such spaces neither provide young people an opportunity to have a say in how they are conceived nor leave space for young people's styles to become visible. On the contrary, young people are locked out of certain spaces and their appropriation attempts are more often criminalised than encouraged in the neo-liberal city (Kallio/Häkli 2011). Youth cultural research has interpreted young people's symbolic appropriation of the city as an expression of youth cultural styles where subcultures can be seen as acts of resistance to these processes of exclusion (Hall/Jefferson 1976). From this reasoning, a certain idea of the relationship between space and youth participation has developed: Although young people need spaces to appropriate in order to develop their identity and integrate into society, city development does not reflect this. Additionally, these spaces are not empty; appropriation also does not completely reinvent them. Appropriation is guided by "*certain structures, patterns and rules that are inscribed in objects of appropriation or mediated through interaction with other people*" (Hüllemann/Reutlinger/Deinet 2018, p. 387). In this way, appropriation as a mutual mediation process between a subject and an object thus accounts for both agency as well as for structure. The task of youth policy was therefore positioned as the responsibility to create these spaces where young people can integrate and participate in the urban society. The spaces were often conceptualised as 'small worlds' where youth cultural styles were allowed and recognised as something valuable.

This article investigates the relationship between space and appropriation for young people by presenting empirical data from two youth movements that are both based on specific – albeit different – ideals about how young people should interact with the urban environment. One of these, the Scout movement, has a long history and was initially formed in order to save young people (in the beginning exclusively young boys) from the alleged social evils of the contemporary city: "[...] to try and lessen the great waste of